How to Choose the Right Energy Foods

By Suzanne Girard Eberle

In 2002, Karen Main, a health promotion manager in Portland, Ore., prepared to tackle her first marathon. She packed an ill-fitting fuel belt with Skittles and small packets of dried cranberries and nuts that she had purposefully saved from packaged salad mixes. Looking back, she acknowledges that she didn't fuel herself adequately. "I didn't eat enough, and I figured it out too late," says Main, who laughs while describing how she struggled to open the food packets during the race. Seven years later, Main ran her second marathon to celebrate turning 40. The second time around she got it right, opting for runner-friendly energy chews dispensed from a handy tube. "I never got hungry," she says, "and the blocks were easy to carry and eat." The myriad sport-specific fueling options available to runners make it much easier to refuel while on the move. You're not alone; however, if the seemingly unlimited explosion of new performance-enhancing sports drinks and energy foods has left you confused about what to choose and when best to consume it. Use the following guidelines to select the optimal energy food for your next race.

SPORTS DRINKS

Sports drinks are designed to maximize fluid absorption and enhance performance by delivering readily absorbable carbohydrate and electrolytes, the most crucial being sodium. The better-formulated (and tasting) ones intended for use during exercise usually contain both simple carbs (sucrose, fructose and glucose) and complex carbs (glucose polymers, maltodextrin). Choose a sports drink instead of plain water when running 60 minutes or longer at a moderate intensity.

PROS: Multiple flavors and brands to choose from; readily usable liquid carbohydrates are absorbed more rapidly than solid food; sodium enhances the drive to drink and facilitates the absorption of carbohydrate.

CONS: Unnecessary added ingredients can contribute to digestion woes; you're hostage to the sports drink provided at aid stations unless you carry your own; unlikely to be enough to meet energy needs in marathons and ultras.

ENERGY GELS, CHEWS AND BLOCKS

These sports foods provide fast-acting, easy-to-digest carbohydrate--exactly what hard-working muscles and the brain require to perform while running fast or long.

PROS: Easy to chew and digest; many varieties also provide sodium and small amounts of caffeine, another performance booster during prolonged exercise.

CONS: Need to be taken with recommended amount of water (6 to 8 ounces); semi-solid chews and blocks may boost blood sugar levels more slowly than gels; toting enough with you requires wearing a carrier of some sort.

LIQUID FOOD SUPPLEMENTS

In addition to carbohydrate, these beverages provide varying amounts of protein, fat, vitamins, minerals, electrolytes and other lesser-proven ingredients, such as herbs and metabolites.

These nutrient-dense "liquid energy bars" provide considerably more fuel or energy per ounce than traditional sports drinks.

PROS: Convenient mode for consuming a concentrated dose of energy (calories) and carbohydrate; star as prerace meals or post-recovery drinks due to low fiber and higher energy content; typically a well-tolerated option for ultra-endurance athletes.

CONS: Can lead to digestive problems and dehydration when consumed during moderate-to-high intensity exercise; energy-dense beverage can contribute to unwanted weight gain if routinely consumed in place of meals or snacks.

ENERGY BARS

With practice an energy bar can be easy to carry, chew and digest while running. Unless you'll be on the move longer than four hours, however, choose varieties that obtain most if not all of their calories from carbohydrate (70 percent or more). It's only during longer hauls that the body has time to actually digest and assimilate the fuel from other sources.

PROS: Wide variety of flavors and textures to choose from; travel well; welcome alternative to sweet-tasting drinks, gels, chews and blocks; another option for meeting higher energy requirements of long-distance runs.

CONS: More difficult to chew and digest than liquids, especially when you're fatigued; must take with ample fluid for proper digestion; solids can take much longer to boost blood sugar levels than liquids.

REAL FOOD

Ultra runners can be seen refueling with everything from sports drinks and energy gels to sandwiches, fried chicken and pizza. Ditto for walkers and back-of-the pack marathon runners who often rely on real food for fuel, such as candy, dried fruit or pretzels. The longer duration and slower pace (lower intensity) allows these athletes to profit from consuming real food despite the extra time required to convert energy into fuel the body can use.

PROS: Helps fight "flavor fatigue" common when consuming only sweet-tasting sports foods; allows athletes to meet the high energy demands of prolonged ultra running; can be mentally uplifting or rewarding.

CONS: Protein, fiber and fat in real foods can slow absorption and digestion time and increase potential gastrointestinal problems; more complicated logistics of carrying and consuming while on the move.